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SUBJECT: HONDURAN IMMIGRATION: THE PROBLEMS PERSIST, BUT  
WITH A ROADMAP FOR ZELAYA ADMINISTRATION TO REFORM

11. (SBU) Summary. Post worked closely with the outgoing Maduro Administration during its final months in office to both urge and assist reform of the Honduran immigration service. Post has presented the GOH with solid evidence of ongoing corruption in the immigration service that is directly abetting illegal migration to the United States. Despite consistent GOH statements in support of reform, they took no concrete steps. An independent commission established by President Maduro to assess and recommend next steps prepared and delivered to President Maduro a report that details weaknesses in the current system and outlines reform proposals. The new Zelaya Administration has indicated interest in the issue; it remains unclear how or when it will begin to put that interest into action. End summary.

Corruption at Immigration - A Decades Old Problem

12. (SBU) The GOH immigration service has been a consistent source of scandal since at least the early 1990's scandals surrounding the sale of Honduran passports to mainland Chinese seeking an easy route to the United States. The root of the problems in immigration, as in so many other areas in Honduras, is corruption. Efforts to strengthen systems or introduce secure documents over the years have been frustrated by persistent, pervasive self-interest, from the lowest clerks to the Director and even higher. Following the mid-2005 criminal raids and investigations of the immigration service, the senior leadership was fired and briefly jailed. The GOH still has a pending criminal case against the former immigration director and post continues to urge a vigorous prosecution, though with limited expectations that anyone will serve any significant prison time for the fraudulent sale of Honduran passports. An outsider, a lawyer with a reputation for probity but no practical experience, was brought in to run the agency. He lasted about two months before he resigned in the midst of a flurry of news stories when he labeled the agency a "gold mine" of corruption. A placeholder who was labeled "incompetent" by his minister-level boss has held the job since then.

The Embassy Seeks to Drive the Reform Effort Through the

13. (SBU) Faced with this thicket of problems and recognizing the threat to U.S. national security from a near neighbor that issues passports without meaningful controls, Embassy sections and agencies including DHS/ICE, POL, RSO, and CONS began working together to propose specific reforms for the service. In August 2005, post issued a press release expressing disappointment at developments in the criminal cases arising out of the earlier raids at Immigration. This prompted a strong verbal confrontation between the then Minister of the Presidency, Ramon Medina Luna, and the Charge. In September and October 2005, then Minister of Government Roberto Pacheco, whose ministry is responsible for passports, residencies, and other immigration matters, repeatedly told Embassy officers, including the Ambassador, that he had been instructed by President Maduro to seek our advice and to do anything we asked. Many in the Embassy thought Pacheco, and perhaps Maduro, were merely seeking to avoid more negative headlines before the close-fought November 27 presidential elections.

14. (SBU) On October 26, we proposed to Pacheco three areas for reform:

1A. Strengthen and better protect immigration's databases to deter, or even prevent, corrupt manipulation. Create a tracking system that would record every action regarding passport and residence records to assist later investigations. Install an automated entry/exit stamp system to minimize opportunities for the corrupt sale of backdated stamps.

1B. Create an internal affairs investigative unit, to work jointly with an Embassy-vetted police unit and the Organized Crime Prosecutor's office. Restrict access by document fixers to the immigration services offices.

1C. Establish position descriptions and minimum skill requirements for immigration service employees, and ensure employees meet those requirements. Improve salaries to reduce incentives to corruption.

In his November 17 reply to our letter, Minister of Government Pacheco accepted substantially all of our proposals.

15. (SBU) In mid-October, President Maduro ordered the creation of a Commission on Ethics and Transparency (CET) as a sub-part of the National Anti-Corruption Commission and directed them to report to him 45 days later, i.e. shortly after the election. Those who thought the CET was little more than a fig leaf to suppress scandals until after the November 27 elections apparently underestimated them. On December 7, the CET briefed the Ambassador and others on substantial problems they had uncovered in the databases and other systems at Immigration. They reported that what had been previously presented to us and to the Honduran public as advances in systems security and in biometric data collection were, in fact, steps backward. For example, the GOH's publicly touted biometrics collection system, which collects photos and fingerprints at the major international airports and several land borders, is not connected to a central database. The data remains isolated at the collection point.

#### The Commission's Report and the Road Ahead

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16. (SBU) The CET reported to President Maduro in early January 2006 and proposed reforms in five strategic areas:

Organizational Restructuring  
Administrative Processes  
System of Ethics and Institutional Transparency  
Anti-Corruption Systems

## Modernization of Applicable Laws

Post believes the CET report provides a good summary of the existing problems in the Immigration Service and a road map for its reform. The question now is whether the political will exists in the new Zelaya Administration to realize this possibility. Some weaknesses could be resolved through administrative improvements, but others -- such as low wages and limited professional training -- will require the Zelaya Administration to find new resources.

¶7. (U) Despite receiving the CET report in early December, Maduro left office on January 27 without taking any steps to implement the CET's recommendations or otherwise reform immigration. Worse still, the GOH has apparently held the CET's report private so there has been no public pressure to move forward with reform. Indeed, the director of immigration told the CG on February 7 that he had not seen the report.

¶8. (SBU) Post began raising immigration reform with the Zelaya administration during the transition and key figures such as the new Minister of Government, Jorge Arturo Reina, indicated an awareness of the problem and our concern about it. It remains unclear, however, where responsibility for immigration will lie in the new government. The Ambassador has told senior GOH officials, including President Zelaya, that he has doubts about the suitability of Minister Reina to head reform efforts. On February 2, President Zelaya told the Ambassador and FM Milton Jimenez that he would move the function from the Ministry of Government to the MFA. On February 6, FM Jimenez told the Ambassador that President Zelaya had asked him and Minister of the Presidency Rosenthal to advise Reina of the change. Post will continue to press the new GOH to face this threat to U.S. national security.

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